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Immoral Education: The assault on teachers' identity, autonomy and efficacy or Can education in a troubled world help us in becoming human?.

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Immoral Education: The assault on teachers' identity, autonomy and efficacy

Abstract

In the current socio-economic and political climate and the increasing commercialisation of schools, educationalist can find it hard to sustain a positive role and purpose. As teachers' identities and sense of efficacy are eroded, the recruitment of teachers is becoming increasingly problematic and attrition rates are rising. In this paper (a summary of a forthcoming book) I examine the philosophical and psychological basis for the professional identity of teachers and the effects of misunderstanding and mistreating teachers' beliefs in themselves. This requires consideration of inter- and intra-personal dialogues and the relationship with others. It is argued that only by reaffirming teachers' sense of creativity, autonomy and agency can education cease to be a mechanistic exercise in social engineering with no fixed goals and rediscover the simpler and more profound purpose of helping people to be human.

Immoral Education: The assault on teachers' identity, autonomy and efficacy or
[Slide 1]
Can education in a troubled world help us in becoming human?

'*The ethical task is to extend a welcome.*' (Shildrick, 2005, p. 43)

[Slide 2]

Colleagues, These are choleric, troubled times.

I first came to the ideas and poetry of Gabriel Garcia Márquez in his novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude.* In that book Márquez described the dangers of isolation for a family that cannot (or will not) escape their own self-inflicted misfortunes. In a later book, *Love and the Time of Cholera,* Márquez revisited the theme of the iterative nature of history, death and rebirth, and pondered the power of relationships in sickness and health. *Love and the Time of Cholera* is about relationships and the consequences of rejection and inequality, but it also challenges us to question the facades and personal identities created and recreated by the characters in the novel. It is about the process of 'continuing to become.' As Marquez wrote in the novel:

"He allowed himself to be swayed by his conviction that human beings are not born once and for all on the day their mothers give birth to them, but that life obliges them over and over again to give birth to themselves."

I have much sympathy with that view.

Much of what follows is about relationships, how we see ourselves and how we are perceived by others. For educational psychologists working with colleagues in schools, I suggest this entails also thinking about what shapes and goes some long way to define how teachers see themselves.

How we are identified by others and how we identify ourselves are not necessarily congruent but both are integral to the discourses we hold with ourselves and others;

they are part of the vernacular and both are yoked to the culture of individuality that is so pervasive in many societies.

In this paper I want to say something about my understanding of what has become of education in England. My concerns are that in England, for certain, but almost certainly in the rest of the UK and in many other countries as well, education is now no longer a democratic and humanizing journey of discovery. Instead, it has become a process in which arbitrary 'Gradgrind' facts have to be 'deposited' in students (Freire, 2005); teachers are required to demonstrate objectively that sufficient facts have been 'learned'; schools are ranked on the basis of children's test scores, and turned into commercial enterprises accountable only to shareholders – not the local community. Under such performative regimes, teachers are disabled from being human and consequently unable to help others (students and colleagues) also become beings with humanity. I want to discuss some of the factors that, if addressed, might help avoid the further dehumanisation of education. For a start, as Margrit Shildrick indicated,

[Slide 3]

in becoming human, we have to be able to extend a welcome to others, including others that challenge our ways of being. These others include 'the rebellious Other' that Shildrick identified in Derrida's work, and the 'unregenerate Adam' that Dewey posited as emerging whenever the prevailing method of obtaining results are by force rather than communication and enlightenment (Dewey, 1954, p. 154). In order to become human it is necessary to both welcome and include others and allow ourselves to change in the resulting interactions. This is not simply, crudely an invocation to overturn the orthodoxy of the moment but to recognise, welcome and critically befriend the problematic.

Let me start by looking at *<u>Some Contextualising considerations</u>*

- England has one of the most unequal income distributions amongst the most affluent countries of the world (Dorling, 2017). It is now widely recognised that greater income inequality is clearly associated with poorer social, educational and health outcome.
- So for instance: [Slide 4] shows the association between income inequality (the gap between the wealthiest and poorest) and an educational outcome: performance in maths.

In more detail, as you can see here

[SLIDE 5]

In the United States, in 2015, the best-off tenth of households enjoyed an average annual income of $439,883 a year, over 18 times more than the $23,460 a year that the average of the poorest tenth of households survive on each year. In the UK, that has the 7th greatest gap in incomes (after US, Singapore, Israel, Greece, Spain and Italy) the comparable figures are $283,178 (£209,135), more than 10 times greater than the mean for the poorest 10% at $27,306 (£20,166) (Stotesbury & Dorling 2015, p3)

The data also show that the USA with the highest ratio of incomes has the lowest score in the international assessment of mathematical ability; Finland , with the lowest ratio has the highest score. However these are just correlations; causality cannot be inferred from this alone!

If we look at available data from NHS and DfE these tell us something about the current state of the educational workforce in England :

It is hard to avoid seeing some connection between these and the overall economic status of England / the UK.

[Slide 6]

- (DfE, 2016a, 2016b) in 2015
- although 49680 teachers entered the profession, 50140 left, continuing a trend of attrition.
- 21% of teachers retiring due to health had diagnosed mental ill-health;
- Prevalence of mental ill-health amongst teachers is estimated at 15% (higher than many other EU countries);

Other data (also from DfE) tells another, not unrelated, story about what is happening to many young people who <u>should be gaining</u> from education.

[Slide 7]

- 5800 children and young people were permanently excluded from schools; of these:
  - Boys 3 times more likely than girls to be excluded;
  - Pupils of Black Caribbean heritage more than 3 times more likely to be excluded than all others;
  - Children eligible for FSM, 4 times more likely than those not eligible;
  - Children with recognised and supported SEN were 7 times more likely to PExd than children with no identified SEN.
  - 121,000 children have no permanent home;
  - 25% of children live in poverty.

The Task

With this accumulation of data in mind, it seems to me that there are sufficient grounds for wanting to review our educational systems, processes and priorities. The data suggest 'education' is not in the best of health. Teachers are suffering and both teachers and young people are being forced out. Social mobility is a myth.

But we learn from our interactions with others and, I suggest, if education is to prosper, we need to learn to be able to interact positively with each other and gain in understandings of each other. On such grounds I propose that education should have as its purpose that which John Macmurray proposed: to help us learn to be human.

In the traditions of most western philosophy there is a powerful emphasis on a notion of 'the self' as an individual entity – also generally portrayed as male. However, in reality, we do not, cannot exist in isolation. We can only become human through and by means of interactions; interactions that have respect for others. I don't think the local (English) task is insuperable; the international task may take longer. (However, we can take heart from the evidence that it is possible to conceptualise, implement and sustain more enlightened educational practices (such as exist in Finland)[1]. Although I have not attempted to examine those alternatives in any detail here (I hope to do that in the future), in order to change the ethos for education in England (and, I suspect, elsewhere), I suggest we will benefit from a better understanding of psychological factors that affect what teachers do and how they do it.)

I have been asked if I think that the task of 'becoming human' might have changed over time. I don't think that it has changed. Although technological, political and economic circumstances have changed, the task of becoming ***human*** still resides in learning about being with and for others.

The task starts from the beginning of time. The radical psychiatrist of the 1960s RD Laing commented that '*At birth the stone age child meets the 20th century mother;'* and John Dewey, inheriting much (not all of it good) from Charles Darwin, had said something similar (in the 1950s) about the recurrent need for us to help humans become human beings from the beginning:

'*Each human is born an infant… immature, helpless, dependent upon the activities of others.' (*Dewey, 1954, p. 24)

I am not suggesting that that the evolution of the human species has ended; I'm sure it has not. But I fear that the environment in which our socialising genotype and phenotypes develop, the environment for education, is corrupt. Education and social

developments may (and arguably should) be in a reciprocal relationship. Educators have a role in communicating cultural standards fit for the future. Reciprocally, society determines the standards for transmission. If, as is probable, social standards have been hijacked by the tyranny of a 'philosophy' of dubious heritage (neoliberalism), we are right to be concerned for the future, and for the reciprocity of human dialogue that exists and is integral to human development.

I think this requires us to adopt a critical stance and to engage in philosophical and psychological enquiry and to identify the crucial factors.

[Slide 8]

What I see as harmful and immoral about education in 2017

A few years ago I held a seminar for academic educationalists. The group included teacher educators, and educational researchers. I asked them to form small groups and discuss what they thought the purpose of education was. I knew I was being naïve (as always) but I was curious about what measure of agreement might emerge. The variety of views that did emerge was enlightening - but surprisingly little consensus emerged. I think I now understand a little better why a greater consensus was not apparent.

In thinking about my own views of the purposes and practices of education, I have wondered about the moral imperative for education: **what is education *for* and what does it do for / to people?**

One of my conclusions is that the treatment of teachers as both human and 'educators' could be described as 'immoral' and the situation of too many young people is unethical[1]. The more I read of Dewey and Macmurray's work, the more I am persuaded that education should be grounded with a moral purpose – and at the moment it isn't. My view is that in our society the position most teachers find themselves in is unethical, and that the way they are treated is immoral.

Much of my own earlier education was based in a positivist paradigm of scientific enquiry; and I still hold, as a scientist, that we should not be doing things in education, with young people, that do not have theoretical and empirical warrants. I remind students that we should be loathe to take medicines that have not undergone rigorous trials; but I must also agree with Gert Biesta (and others) who wrote that

[1] Appiah distinguished between ethical and moral questions. The former, he suggested are about '*which kinds of lives are good or bad for a person to lead.'* The moral questions are about the '*principles about how a person should treat other people*.' (Appiah, 2007b, p. xiii).

'*if we wish to say something about the direction of education we always need to complement factual information with views about what is considered desirable. We need, in other words, … to* [also] *engage with values.'* (Biesta, 2015, pp. 12-13)

Without establishing ethical and moral values we remain at risk of uncritical (and quite possibly barely conscious) seduction by neoliberal economic and political policies. As Biesta and others have shown, education (from early years settings to universities) is now in thrall to an a-philosophical and dehumanising performativity, and the emphasis is on individual effort and success[2]. It is obvious that there is now ample proof that,

[Slide 9]

as Einstein said, '*Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts.'*

In education the countability fallacy is exemplified in universities by the crude system employed to gather and quantify feedback on teaching; and in schools, in the priority given to the use of 'correct' punctuation by 16-year old students (never mind what they are trying to say, just let it be correctly spelled and punctuated.)[3]

Commenting from the viewpoint of a different conceptualisation of school-based education (in Finland), Pasi Sahlberg has said of the market-driven educational systems that we have in England, USA and other countries

[Slide 10]

'*The current climate of accountability in the public sector often threatens school and community social capital and damages trust, rather than supports it. As a consequence, teachers and school leaders are no longer trusted; this decline of trust is a crisis of suspicion… Although the pursuit of accountability provides parents and politicians with more information, it also builds suspicion, low morale, and professional cynicism.'* (Sahlberg, 2010, p. 57)

It is no surprise, therefore, to find that in England school inspections have been described as creating 'panoptic performativity'[4]

In this world staff come to believe they are constantly being observed. Drawing on Jeremy Bentham's utilitarian ideas about corrective punishment, this phrase was coined to summarise the experience of staff in a school that had been deemed by Ofsted to be failing. The school was then subject to frequent visits from Ofsted and Local Authority staff. School staff felt they were constantly being watched and assessed. In a period of nine months they had five inspections; overall, eight inspections in eighteen months. Unsurprisingly researchers found that the sense of

being continuously monitored (and disciplined) led the staff in that school to show narrowly defined conformity and report lowered morale.

Although economic policies and political (rather than educational) decisions have, inevitably, affected the management and ethos of schools, and, in turn, teachers' practice, some of what ails education has a much longer history and more persistent discourse. Much of this has to do with the various methods of, and rationales for, segregating and labelling groups of children and others (parents, for instance). These practices are mainly grounded in a range of notions of disability and educability, and the spurious notions of ability; but they also reveal even less palatable constructs about culture, race and ethnicity.

[Slide 11]

In the race to compete, to be the 'best', it is inevitable that others will be denigrated. Other schools cannot be as good as the best. But that process inevitably affects those within a school who hinder progress within the parameters of the competition. Thus, as the neoliberal mantra extols the virtue of competition and competitiveness, schools are implicitly encouraged to shed - and implicitly or explicitly label - those students who might otherwise prevent their school from being the 'best'. (This embodies a paradox that neoliberal practices cannot resolve: choice versus competition. Parents are, in principle, given the right to choose the school they would like their child to attend. Schools, in order to succeed in the competition stakes are also given the power to choose which pupils they will admit or exclude. As we have recently seen, the cost to a school of being inclusive can be too great when weighed against the prizes of measured 'success'.[5] I'm referring here to the incidence last year of cheating in some of the countries notionally most 'prestigious' independent schools.)

In such a culture, in which political and economic directives from on high trump intra- and inter-professional dialogue - meaningful dialogue between learners (teacher and taught)- , it is hard to see how the professional and creative autonomy of teachers, their sense of agency, can thrive. Indeed, as Mark Priestly, Gert Biesta and Sarah Robinson have recently suggested has happened in Scotland:

'*the combined influence of at least two decades of intrusive input and output regulation may well have to a large extent eroded teachers' capacity for agency and have taken away important resources and opportunities for the achievement of agency from their practice.'* (Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2015, p. 125)

The philosopher, Kwame Anthony Appiah has written similarly in his wonderful book 'The ethics of identity', to say '*Developing the capacity for autonomy is necessary for human well-being…'* (Appiah, 2007b; emphasis in original)

[Slide 12]

The 'capacity for autonomy' is for me, and as Albert Bandura also implied, intimately related to the development of beliefs in efficacy and knowing that one is able do what is necessary in order to achieve certain outcomes. But, as Appiah also stressed, this cannot be autonomy at any cost. Conceptualising the capacity and potential of autonomy and its close relative, agency, entails ethical considerations. There is not, as Appiah said and 'value-free measure of relative autonomy' (Ethics of Identity, p43). In our democratic endeavours we do not accept the perceived autonomy of a tyrant. One would hope education was not a form of tyranny; but then many will argue that the undemocratic supplanting of state (local or central government) responsibility for education by commercial interest is a form of tyranny. And what do tyrants do…? (they probably kill you in the end.)

As social beings we are and must remain indebted to each other for our identity and existence. We cannot survive without each other and, therefore, must respect each other. In democratic societies autonomy carries ethical responsibilities, and these should be, I suggest, at the heart of education. The work of Tajfel, Lacan, Levinas and others, based as it was in the extremes of ethnic and religious hatred, has provided understanding of how we can too easily mistreat others. Tajfel's work, and the more recent work of Nick Haslam and others, has shown that by socially categorising and grouping people we legitimate exclusion, and build in suspicion and the grounds for hostility. My point is to say, if, in educational systems we continue to treat teachers, students or communities as members of objectified categories and exclude (disenfranchise) those who don't 'fit', we cannot be surprised by interpersonal and intercultural hostility. Alternatively, we must, I urge, extend a welcome to others.

[Slide 13]

So, What do I mean by 'others'?

One of the problems that follows from taking an essentialist and reductionist view of identity (aside from the effects of categorisation and stereotyping) is that it implies there lies an ultimate causal origin behind the identity. (Roy, 2010, p. 176; emphasis in the original.) The solution for Derrida (and others drawing from the well of phenomenology first tapped by Hegel (1977)[6]), was to construct identity in terms of differences. Just as we notice something most quickly when, for instance, a bird flies

up from the camouflage of the leaves in a hedge, so we distinguish ourselves and others in comparisons with what they are not.

Ultimately this is a definition and relationship with 'otherness' and Edward Sampson used this deconstruction of essentialism as the cornerstone of his *relational* view of identity:

[Slide 14]

'*The essential reality of a given object can appear only by virtue of the unstated other that is necessary for the object's identity to appear as such. In short, otherness is the basis for all identity, thereby undoing the essentialist view of identity and requiring that each identity be understood in terms of differences.'* (Sampson, 2008, p. 90)

Thus we may see how we are primarily defined by our difference from the Other but refract different differences from each other (including ourselves) that we encounter day by day.

Thus, to repeat what I have already said, I do not think we can conceive ourselves to be isolated, entirely self-sufficient beings (autarchs). We exist in interaction with others (*pace* Margaret Thatcher, society does and must exist [7]), and, in turn, others cumulatively contribute to our view of ourselves. Others affirm that we exist. Whether or not it is necessary to label each other as members of a particular social group (or tribe) is another matter. Whether or not we choose to accept our given labels is also a matter for discussion (elsewhere).

[Slide 15]

As John Macmurray (1957/1991, p12) said in 1957

'*Against the assumption that the Self is an isolated individual, I have set the view that the Self is a <u>person</u>, and that personal existence is constituted by the relation of persons.'*

<u>What I propose as alternatives</u>

My argument is that if education has any chance of subverting the dehumanising effects of neoliberalism, the performativity that is required by the commercialisation of education, we have to reassert the importance of the interpersonal dialogue of human relationships and to accept the diversity and challenges of accepting Others.

[Slide 16]

Accordingly, I agree with Ira Bogotch in thinking that

'our challenge is pedagogical and curricular, that is, to reconstruct a more inclusive notion of 'the other' locally. … this is the socially just response on behalf of public education for which we are responsible. The challenge is to shift our intellectual and dispositional activities taking into account values and beliefs held by 'the other,' be they religions, ineffable ideas, and different common sense reasonings on experiences.' (Bogotch, 2017, p. 234)

Bogotch was very clear that he was not calling for an end to critiques of neo-liberalism, rather seeking ways of challenging neo-liberalism and reconstructing alternatives. To do this we need to be open to possibilities and critical of orthodoxies. Broadly speaking our strategies might either be political and pragmatic in order to find a *modus vivendi* with neoliberalism; or to work within the educational and empirical traditions and reconstruct viable radical alternatives. Either way we need to be working and communicating with each other and with those who have the greater investment in education: teachers, parents and students. Bogotch's view of the need to 'reconstruct a more inclusive notion of 'the other' locally' was clearly intended to emphasise the importance of schools working with their local communities; of the importance of positive reciprocal relationships and dialogue between school staff and the community[8].

For education to have a valid moral purpose, as Sahlberg has argued, we need to replace suspicion and anxiety with greater trust, and strengthen collective responsibilities. But Bogotch has also warned that if educational researchers (and, I think, this should include Educational Psychologists) do not communicate and advocate views that advance and support reconstruction, they risk becoming a marginalised elite[9]. In this respect and in all others it is crucial that interpersonal interactions are respectful and enabling. We are, as I have stressed, dependent on each other for our well-being. In order for us to be human and humanising we must require education to be built on, embody, model and develop such inter-relationships. This might start by reconsidering how teachers as educators are treated. And as we do this, of course, we could also meditate on how as Educational Psychologists we are an Other for the teachers we meet in the course of our professional work. (We also need to reflect on our heritage as part of the SEN 'Industry' as Sally Tomlinson (2017) has called it, and consider if that is at all compatible with the need to re-humanise education.)

Dewey (1954) recognised that learning to be human is experimental and never complete. But it will never be realisable without moral principles and systematic and

continuous curiosity and enquiry. Becoming human, entailing as it does, the development of understandings about interrelationships, should be a fascinating process. This cannot be the case when society, education and educationalists are dehumanised.

The ethical way of being and becoming is, therefore, optimistic, educational, communicative and interpersonal. Bogotch underlined the important role for school leaders in creating opportunities and a culture of 'change'. However, to leave it at that (and I don't think Bogotch intended to) is to risk 'othering' teachers, schools' constituents, and their communities. Education can be, as David Hansen, has said, a route to being cosmopolitan.[10] Teachers enter the profession 'wanting to make a difference' albeit, perhaps in just a small part of the world. The enthusiasm and vision they can bring is integral to enacting change and enabling the collective beliefs and practices of the entire staff in schools. To embrace the difference that teachers can create is to simultaneously welcome the other and the diversity of others. Through such recognition comes learning. The role of teacher entails the acceptance of others as different and as individually different. Accepting this is part of the process through which we each become who we are, becoming individual persons in our different circumstances, discovering our different motivations and interests.

Returning to where I started, by asking 'Can education in a troubled world help us in becoming human?', but taking a more pragmatic question posed for schools (and educationalists) by Sahlberg: '*How* [can we] *deal with external productivity demands on the one hand, while simultaneously teaching with a moral purpose?*' we might conclude by asserting, as Sahlberg did

[Slide 17]:

'Schools will not be able to educate their students, unless they have:

a) *Internal conditions that respect their professional intuition, knowledge and skills to craft best learning environments for their students;*
b) *A social context and necessary social capital in their community that provide encouraging and supportive conditions of and will to learning for their students; and*
c) *Adequate external norms and expectations that rely on responsibility and internal accountability to reach good learning for all students.*' (Sahlberg, 2010, p. 48)

However, I will conclude more metaphysically.

[Slide 18]

Derek Parfit's book 'Reasons and Persons' is an intensely logical (reasoned) account (story) of what is entailed in being an ethically and morally aware 'person'. Here and in my forthcoming book I have attempted to weave together philosophical and psychological narratives about teaching and teachers, their moral and ethical positioning and how these affect their identities and efficacy. About half-way through his book Parfit arrived at a conclusion about himself, his identity and his view of himself in interaction with others. He had already concluded that his 'identity' as a person was not a 'fact' separate from his physical and psychological existence. Arriving at that conclusion was for him a liberating experience:

'*When I believed that my existence was such a further fact, I seemed imprisoned in myself. My life seemed like a glass tunnel, through which I was moving faster every year, and at the end of which there was darkness. When I changed my view, the walls of the glass tunnel disappeared. I now live in the open air. There is still a difference between my life and the lives of other people. But the difference is less. Other people are closer. I am less concerned about the rest of my own life, and more concerned about the lives of others.'* (Parfit, 1984, p. 281)

In this way, to return to the theme of Love in the Time of Cholera, we may be reborn.

[Slide 19]

Thank you.

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Notes

[1] The Finnish educational system being a prime example of education in which teachers are well trained and held in high esteem, performativity is spurned, and inclusion is encouraged (for a full account see Sahlberg, 2015).

[2] This central issue is neatly summarised by Pasi Sahlberg (2010, p. 48) who noted the *'emerging educational dilemma: How to deal with external productivity demands one the one hand, while simultaneously teaching for a knowledge society with moral purpose?... Competitive pressures for higher productivity, better efficiency and system-wide excellence are affecting schools and teachers. Competition over students and financial resources are shifting schools' modi operandi from those based on moral purpose towards those that emphasise productivity and efficiency, i.e. measurable outcomes, higher test scores, better positions in school league tables, and thereby greater individualism.'*

[3] A detailed critique of the problems associated with use of test scores to evaluate teaching performance has been provided by Baker et al. (2010)

[4] See Ball (2003) for thoughts about the effects of 'performativity'; and (Courtney, 2016; Perryman, 2006) for accounts that develop the metaphor of the panopticon and the views of staff affected by Ofsted inspections. See also a paper by Murray (2012) who speculated about the effects for teacher educators of the performative culture in schools and concluded that 'training' technicians was replacing 'educating' teachers. The paper by Steven Courtney (2016) takes things on to 'Post-panopticism' in revealing the power of the state over education.

[5] It has been noted that '*Excluding weaker students from tests, student and administrator cheating, and systemic corruption are already found in many schools and districts, as 'survival responses' to increased testing and the race for resources and fame'* Sahlberg (2010, p. 52). However, lest anyone think that the most impoverished environments would be most likely to host cheating, in past few days (August 2017), teachers at two of the most 'prestigious' independent schools in England (Eton and Winchester College) have been reported to have given their students advance warning of questions in forthcoming public exams. On 30th August 2017 The Guardian's headline read 'Weaker pupils 'dumped' by top grammar.' It is reported in the accompanying article that '*Parents and teachers have criticised the school for behaving like an "exam factory", focussing purely on results and school league tables at the expense of students' education and welfare.'* It is interesting to note that it seems that both parents and teachers are concerned.

[6] See also Ferro (2013) for a detailed and accessible gloss on Hegel's work.

[7] Margaret Thatcher: "And, you know, there's no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families. And no government can do anything except through people, and people must look after themselves first. It is our duty to look after ourselves and then, also, to look after our neighbours." **– in an interview in Women's Own in 1987**

[8] As I noted earlier, we (Gibbs & Powell, 2012) found, for instance, that when school staff felt they and parents worked well together the rate of pupil exclusion was significantly lower than from schools in otherwise similar situations.

[9] Bogotch was highly critical of researchers 'contradictory complicity'. '*Our communicative incompetencies – with respect to practitioners and the public – is at least, on the surface, a contradiction to the school reforms we describe and advocate and the coalitions we help and hope to build around the world'* (2017, p. 240).

[10] I have not had space to give adequate attention to concepts of cosmopolitanism. For Hansen, however, cosmopolitanism brings together opportunities for cultural and educational creativity (Hansen, 2005, 2014, 2016). See also what Kwame Anthony Appiah said in his book 'Cosmopolitansim: Ethics in a world of strangers' (Appiah, 2007a)